

I am blissfully proud of all of my students. There is no pursuit more noble than to better your life, and your world, through education. I'm not here to chastise you, and I'm not here to preach. You do not have to agree with me, but I ask you now to allow me to share my ideas with you.

Think for a moment of our time and place in the course of history. We do not enjoy everything about our lives, our government, our society, our culture, our religions, our educations. Discontent is perfectly understandable and it is magnificently constructive. However, does honesty force us to admit that there are many blessings about our time and place in the unfolding human story? Let us never forget how those blessings were acquired:

1) The Inquisition, the Wars of Religion, and persecution happened before some of the people in this world could profess any faith they feel. Number dead unknown. Many in the world still live in societies which deny them this right.

2) So that the western world would prosper: Native American population, almost exterminated. Even without counting diseases, number dead unknown. Racialized slavery, number dead unknown. Colonialism in Africa and Asia, number dead unknown. The records are too poor, and the death toll in each of these cases is too high, for us to know the exact numbers.

3) Before human rights became an international concern: 11 million (6 million of them were Jewish) died in the Holocaust.

4) A sampling of cases in which we turned away from others:

- a) Rwandan Genocide of 1994, 800,000-1 million dead in one hundred days
- b) War in Darfur since 2003, number dead unknown, ongoing
- c) ISIL, thousands dead since 2014, ongoing

The human story is not only a story of pain. We talk about the achievements of great kings and great thinkers, and even a little about the people who helped them to their accomplishments. We do hear stories of people who sacrificed even their lives to spare others. But, everything that is good about our lives was achieved in some way because of the horror of the past, or upon pain inflicted on distant societies, elsewhere in the world. Yes, perhaps the most horrifying reality is that the agony never ceased.

You are only one person, and so am I. No matter how much each of us might want to revolutionize the world, no one can do so alone. Each person has power, don't get me wrong, but we must acknowledge our limitations as well. We especially never can take back history. We may wish that none of the repugnance of the past had happened. I wish we did not have to have this discussion. I truly wish I had a better story, a better world to give you. But, the only past we have is the one that was given to us. We will never right the disastrous wrongs that were committed. We will not make right all of the wrongs that are still committed.

The victims of past suffering don't want anything from us. Most of them are dead; we cannot give them anything. But, I feel that they did, or do, want much that is good *for* us:

**1) Remembering them:** because we won't learn if we do not know them. No one will survive the ordeal that is history, or the struggle that is life, if they are forgotten.

**2) Surviving and living our lives:** because nothing good will come from our disengagement; but good may come from our efforts.

**3) Being strong:** because the day will come upon which we will tell future generations the same that these brave men and women have said to us. Pain is always present for humanity. Who here has been vaccinated for smallpox? None of us. Smallpox was eradicated through human effort. We cannot even fathom the number of people who died excruciatingly of smallpox before humanity could defeat it. I might die of cancer before there is a cure. I might die in a car accident before someone finds a way to make vehicles safer. I might die in a terrorist attack before peace is negotiated.

When we use the story of the past to condemn or blame anyone; when we ignore, or trivialize the story of the past so that we can cope with our own self-involved feelings of guilt; when we use the past as an excuse for any tribulation we can or should surmount; when we think anyone owes us anything for the pains of the past, we are being so extraordinarily selfish that we miss all chances to learn.

Rather, I think it is better for us to realize something true. I will read you one of my favorite poems, written by John Donne after he heard a funeral bell, published in 1624:

*No man is an island,  
Entire of itself.  
Each is a piece of the continent,  
A part of the main.  
If a clod be washed away by the sea,  
Europe is the less.  
As well as if a promontory were.  
As well as if a manor of thine own  
Or of thine friend's were.  
Any man's death diminishes me,  
For I am involved in mankind.  
Therefore, send not to know  
For whom the bell tolls,  
It tolls for thee.*

Every time a victim dies for no reason or hateful actions turned against anyone, all of humanity suffers. Those who die or those who are physically or emotionally maimed need not look like us, or have the same culture as we do. Study history, and your heart will break over and over. However, the world moves forward, time goes on, without our consent.

There is much more that we need to understand, as well: let us think for a moment of one of the Grand Inquisitors, the conquistadors, the slave traders, the Nazis, the suicide bombers, the masterminds of oppressive regimes. Maybe we will watch as he comes to us, and we might see sincerity on his face. We might keep watching and see him fall at our feet. We may listen as he breathes words like these: "Do with me as you will, but, I beg you to forgive me."

Does anyone like this scenario? I don't. Does anyone have an answer for him? I don't. But, we can't go back now.

Do we want to kick this person, beat him, strangle him, slit his throat? We may say to him, "no, I will never forgive you." Did this response avenge the people he tortured and killed?

Did it improve anyone's life, or make anyone a better person? And, when we fully know the people we truly are, can we actually say that we want to be merciless enough to push someone into eternity with no chance of forgiveness?

I confess to you that I am a grudge-holding bitch. I also will tell you that personal experience has shown me, in some of the hardest ways, the phenomenal virtue of forgiving. This lesson has proven most important for me when extending forgiveness seems impossible.

What forgiveness can I grant to this person before me?

I see the person before me. I know that my world was created largely by his blindness to his victims' humanity. His perceptions of them, tailored to justify his wants, steered his mistreatment of other people.

Now, my perception of him, based upon my repulsion for his deeds, pulls like temptation. My conscience hums a signal for me to see myself reflected in him. The two of us are locked there as he awaits my answer.

I'm wondering what will happen to me, and to the world, if I repeat his mistake? This thought makes me realize that I do want to resist the evil that took control of his actions. To save myself, I look past my perceptions to see the human within him. Sensing the truly human dimension of this man leads to forgiveness. Forgiveness therefore negates all his false reasoning, the untruthfulness driving his destructive actions.

Hence, I truly sense that the world cannot move on, that we cannot live our lives fully, until we look down into his eyes and say to him earnestly, "yes, I do forgive you, with all that I have, I forgive you." These words do not mean that we have forgotten his accountability for the devastation he made. We certainly don't forget our empathy for his victims. It is our own future that we have earned by making this choice. As we go on into that future, we will have what we learn to guide us. We even might do something glorious with that future. One or two of us might receive praise through the centuries for changing the world. Each of us may become one many pieces that brings a speck of light in the darkness.

Many of us, including me, will have to fight everyday for the remainder of our lives to make the decision to forgive this person. It is unlikely that we will see any Grand Inquisitor again, and the chance that he will come to us in the spirit of penitence is even smaller. However, it does not matter much if the Grand Inquisitors are remorseful for what they have done; the end result remains the same.

I don't think that it is wise for us to forget that, no matter our individual roles or the political and social loyalties we embrace, all of us are perpetually flawed. Why did we allow a baby to starve to death anywhere in the world? Why did we deliberately persist in driving to extinction a species, like bees (knowing that humanity will not survive long without it)? Why did we neglect a disease that killed millions, including scores of children, because we stigmatized its victims? Why did we participate in wars for which future generations will pay the price?

The curious truth is that before we repeat the wisdom of victims, we will gasp the pleas of the oppressors to those who will replace us. Individually, we may not be Grand Inquisitors, but one day, our spirits should grovel before the living. We might have a tiny and vain hope inside us that the living will grant us forgiveness, and an even smaller, desperate wish that they will remember us with compassion. But most minute, and least possible to fulfill, will be the desire for the forgiveness that we will need to grant ourselves in that moment. Quite the humbling image; it leaves me with a relieved feeling, as well as a tiny and frightening sense of what it means to be human.

This is Life; this is Reality. All the vileness, the wonder, the beauty, one piece of the reason why we are here. A quote attributed to Leo Tolstoy, author of *War and Peace*, reads: "History would be an excellent thing if only it were true." He was right. I think this quote means that no one knows the answers, that we all have different perceptions, that the academic spin really amounts only to opinions, and that there are many sides of every story that are never told. However, I do believe that the lessons we learn from the terribly-biased academic field of history, from self-important professors and their ridiculous classes, can be true. These true lessons illuminate a universe far exceeding our little and brief lives. Perhaps the first questions are: What will we do with all that we have learned? What is our part in the forward movement?

Before we start our dialogue, I thank you for allowing me to communicate my observations. And, I would like you to know that I won't rule out the possibility that, as Socrates supposedly professed, "I know that I know nothing." I will end with this admission, summed up by a few lines I once heard in a play: "I'm sorry. I talk nonsense all day; it's incurable... my tongue is stupid. My heart isn't."

Teacher privilege time is over. I leave the floor to your comments.